Chapter IX. Somebody Attends to the Door.

With slow steps Linley crossed the lawn; his mind gloomily absorbed in thoughts which had never before troubled his easy nature--thoughts heavily laden with a burden of self-reproach.

Arrived at the limits of the lawn, two paths opened before him. One led into a quaintly pretty inclosure, cultivated on the plan of the old gardens at Versailles, and called the French Garden. The other path led to a grassy walk, winding its way capriciously through a thick shrubbery. Careless in what direction he turned his steps, Linley entered the shrubbery, because it happened to be nearest to him.

Except at certain points, where the moonlight found its way through open spaces in the verdure, the grassy path which he was now following wound onward in shadow. How far he had advanced he had not noticed, when he heard a momentary rustling of leaves at some little distance in advance of him. The faint breeze had died away; the movement among the leaves had been no doubt produced by the creeping or the flying of some creature of the night. Looking up, at the moment when he was disturbed by this trifling incident, he noticed a bright patch of moonlight ahead as he advanced to a new turn in the path.

The instant afterward he was startled by the appearance of a figure, emerging into the moonlight from the further end of the shrubbery, and rapidly approaching him. He was near enough to see that it was the figure of a woman. Was it one of the female servants, hurrying back to the house after an interview with a sweetheart? In his black evening dress, he was, in all probability, completely hidden by the deep shadow in which he stood. Would he be less likely to frighten the woman if he called to her than if he allowed her to come close up to him in the dark? He decided on calling to her.

"Who is out so late?" he asked.

A cry of alarm answered him. The figure stood still for a moment, and then turned back as if to escape him by flight.

"Don't be frightened," he said. "Surely you know my voice?"

The figure stood still again. He showed himself in the moonlight, and discovered--Sydney Westerfield.

"You!" he exclaimed.

She trembled; the words in which she answered him were words in fragments.

"The garden was so quiet and pretty--I thought there would be no harm--please let me go back--I'm afraid I shall be shut out--"

She tried to pass him. "My poor child!" he said, "what is there to be frightened about? I have been tempted out by the lovely night, like you. Take my arm. It is so close in here among the trees. If we go back to the lawn, the air will come to you freely."

She took his arm; he could feel her heart throbbing against it. Kindly silent, he led her back to the open space. Some garden chairs were placed here and there; he suggested that she should rest for a while.

"I'm afraid I shall be shut out," she repeated. "Pray let me get back."

He yielded at once to the wish that she expressed. "You must let me take you back," he explained. "They are all asleep at the house by this time. No! no! don't be frightened again. I have got the key of the door. The moment I have opened it, you shall go in by yourself."

She looked at him gratefully. "You are not offended with me now, Mr. Linley," she said. "You are like your kind self again."

They ascended the steps which led to the door. Linley took the key from his pocket. It acted perfectly in drawing back the lock; but the door, when he pushed it, resisted him. He put his shoulder against it, and exerted his strength, helped by his weight. The door remained immovable.

Had one of the servants--sitting up later than usual after the party, and not aware that Mr. Linley had gone into the garden--noticed the door, and carefully fastened the bolts on the inner side? That was exactly what had happened.

There was nothing for it but to submit to circumstances. Linley led the way down the steps again. "We are shut out," he said.

Sydney listened in silent dismay. He seemed to be merely amused; he treated their common misfortune as lightly as if it had been a joke.

"There's nothing so very terrible in our situation," he reminded her. "The servants' offices will be opened between six and seven o'clock; the weather is perfect; and the summer-house in the French Garden has one easy-chair in it, to my certain knowledge, in which you may rest and sleep. I'm sure you must be tired--let me take you there."

She drew back, and looked up at the house.

"Can't we make them hear us?" she asked.

"Quite impossible. Besides--" He was about to remind her of the evil construction which might be placed on their appearance together, returning from the garden at an advanced hour of the night; but her innocence pleaded with him to be silent. He only said, "You forget that we all sleep at the top of our old castle. There is no knocker to the door, and no bell that rings upstairs. Come to the summer-house. In an hour or two more we shall see the sun rise."

She took his arm in silence. They reached the French Garden without another word having passed between them.

The summer-house had been designed, in harmony with the French taste of the last century, from a classical model. It was a rough copy in wood of The Temple of Vesta at Rome. Opening the door for his companion, Linley paused before he followed her in. A girl brought up by a careful mother would have understood and appreciated his hesitation; she would have concealed any feeling of embarrassment that might have troubled her at the moment, and would have asked him to come back and let her know when the rising of the sun began. Neglected by her mother, worse than neglected by her aunt, Sydney's fearless ignorance put a question which would have lowered the poor girl cruelly in the estimation of a stranger. "Are you going to leave me here by myself?" she asked. "Why don't you come in?"

Linley thought of his visit to the school, and remembered the detestable mistress. He excused Sydney; he felt for her. She held the door open for him. Sure of himself, he entered the summer-house.

As a mark of respect on her part, she offered the armchair to him: it was the one comfortable seat in the neglected place. He insisted that she should take

it; and, searching the summer-house, found a wooden stool for himself. The small circular room received but little of the dim outer light--they were near each other--they were silent. Sydney burst suddenly into a nervous little laugh.

"Why do you laugh?" he asked good-humoredly.

"It seems so strange, Mr. Linley, for us to be out here." In the moment when she made that reply her merriment vanished; she looked out sadly, through the open door, at the stillness of the night. "What should I have done," she wondered, "if I had been shut out of the house by myself?" Her eyes rested on him timidly; there was some thought in her which she shrank from expressing. She only said: "I wish I knew how to be worthy of your kindness."

Her voice warned him that she was struggling with strong emotion. In one respect, men are all alike; they hate to see a woman in tears. Linley treated her like a child; he smiled, and patted her on the shoulder. "Nonsense!" he said gayly. "There is no merit in being kind to my good little governess."

She took that comforting hand--it was a harmless impulse that she was unable to resist--she bent over it, and kissed it gratefully. He drew his hand away from her as if the soft touch of her lips had been fire that burned it. "Oh," she cried, "have I done wrong?"

"No, my dear--no, no."

There was an embarrassment in his manner, the inevitable result of his fear of himself if he faltered in the resolute exercise of self-restraint, which was perfectly incomprehensible to Sydney. He moved his seat back a little, so as to place himself further away. Something in that action, at that time, shocked and humiliated her. Completely misunderstanding him, she thought he was reminding her of the distance that separated them in social rank. Oh, the shame of it! the shame of it! Would other governesses have taken a liberty with their master? A fit of hysterical sobbing burst its way through her last reserves of self-control; she started to her feet, and ran out of the summer-house.

Alarmed and distressed, he followed her instantly.

She was leaning against the pedestal of a statue in the garden, panting, shuddering, a sight to touch the heart of a far less sensitive man than the man who now approached her. "Sydney!" he said. "Dear little Sydney!" She

tried to speak to him in return. Breath and strength failed her together; she lifted her hand, vainly grasping at the broad pedestal behind her; she would have fallen if he had not caught her in his arms. Her head sank faintly backward on his breast. He looked at the poor little tortured face, turned up toward him in the lovely moonlight. Again and again he had honorably restrained himself--he was human; he was a man--in one mad moment it was done, hotly, passionately done--he kissed her.

For the first time in her maiden's life, a man's lips touched her lips. All that had been perplexing and strange, all that had been innocently wonderful to herself in the feeling that bound Sydney to her first friend, was a mystery no more. Love lifted its veil, Nature revealed its secrets, in the one supreme moment of that kiss. She threw her arms around his neck with a low cry of delight--and returned his kiss.

"Sydney," he whispered, "I love you."

She heard him in rapturous silence. Her kiss had answered for her.

At that crisis in their lives, they were saved by an accident; a poor little common accident that happens every day. The spring in the bracelet that Sydney wore gave way as she held him to her; the bright trinket fell on the grass at her feet. The man never noticed it. The woman saw her pretty ornament as it dropped from her arm--saw, and remembered Mrs. Linley's gift.

Cold and pale--with horror of herself confessed in the action, simple as it was--she drew back from him in dead silence.

He was astounded. In tones that trembled with agitation, he said to her: "Are you ill?"

"Shameless and wicked," she answered. "Not ill." She pointed to the bracelet on the grass. "Take it up; I am not fit to touch it. Look on the inner side."

He remembered the inscription: "To Sydney Westerfield, with Catherine Linley's love." His head sank on his breast; he understood her at last. "You despise me," he said, "and I deserve it."

"No; I despise myself. I have lived among vile people; and I am vile like them."

She moved a few steps away with a heavy sigh. "Kitty!" she said to herself.

"Poor little Kitty!"

He followed her. "Why are you thinking of the child," he asked, "at such a time as this?"

She replied without returning or looking round; distrust of herself had inspired her with terror of Linley, from the time when the bracelet had dropped on the grass.

"I can make but one atonement," she said. "We must see each other no more. I must say good-by to Kitty--I must go. Help me to submit to my hard lot--I must go."

He set her no example of resignation; he shrank from the prospect that she presented to him.

"Where are you to go if you leave us?" he asked.

"Away from England! The further away from you the better for both of us. Help me with your interest; have me sent to the new world in the west, with other emigrants. Give me something to look forward to that is not shame and despair. Let me do something that is innocent and good--I may find a trace of my poor lost brother. Oh, let me go! Let me go!"

Her resolution shamed him. He rose to her level, in spite of himself.

"I dare not tell you that you are wrong," he said. "I only ask you to wait a little till we are calmer, before you speak of the future again." He pointed to the summer-house. "Go in, my poor girl. Rest, and compose yourself, while I try to think."

He left her, and paced up and down the formal walks in the garden. Away from the maddening fascination of her presence, his mind grew clearer. He resisted the temptation to think of her tenderly; he set himself to consider what it would be well to do next.

The moonlight was seen no more. Misty and starless, the dark sky spread its majestic obscurity over the earth. Linley looked wearily toward the eastern heaven. The darkness daunted him; he saw in it the shadow of his own sense of guilt. The gray glimmering of dawn, the songs of birds when the pure light softly climbed the sky, roused and relieved him. With the first radiant rising of the sun he returned to the summer-house.

"Do I disturb you?" he asked, waiting at the door.

"No."

"Will you come out and speak to me?"

She appeared at the door, waiting to hear what he had to say to her.

"I must ask you to submit to a sacrifice of your own feelings," he began. "When I kept away from you in the drawing room, last night--when my strange conduct made you fear that you had offended me--I was trying to remember what I owed to my good wife. I have been thinking of her again. We must spare her a discovery too terrible to be endured, while her attention is claimed by the guests who are now in the house. In a week's time they will leave us. Will you consent to keep up appearances? Will you live with us as usual, until we are left by ourselves?"

"It shall be done, Mr. Linley. I only ask one favor of you. My worst enemy is my own miserable wicked heart. Oh, don't you understand me? I am ashamed to look at you!"

He had only to examine his own heart, and to know what she meant. "Say no more," he answered sadly. "We will keep as much away from each other as we can."

She shuddered at that open recognition of the guilty love which united them, in spite of their horror of it, and took refuge from him in the summer-house. Not a word more passed between them until the unbarring of doors was heard in the stillness of the morning, and the smoke began to rise from the kitchen chimney. Then he returned, and spoke to her.

"You can get back to the house," he said. "Go up by the front stairs, and you will not meet the servants at this early hour. If they do see you, you have your cloak on; they will think you have been in the garden earlier than usual. As you pass the upper door, draw back the bolts quietly, and I can let myself in."

She bent her head in silence. He looked after her as she hastened away from him over the lawn; conscious of admiring her, conscious of more than he dared realize to himself. When she disappeared, he turned back to wait where she had been waiting. With his sense of the duty he owed to his wife penitently present to his mind, the memory of that fatal kiss still left its vivid impression on him. "What a scoundrel I am!" he said to himself as he stood

alone in the summer-house, looking at the chair which she had just left.